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ABSTRACT

This guide examines the problem of providing orientation for foreign students attending U.S. universities. Ideas and suggestions for the design and conduct of orientation programs are provided. Inherent constraints that may impair program success are enumerated, including erratic student arrival times, lack of motivation to participate in orientation, preoccupations, English proficiency, and difficulties in program evaluation; alternatives to complete reliance on formal programsare suggested. The goals of foreign student orientation are outlined and orientation topics are summarized in three categories: (1) practical information; (2) information about the U.S. academic system; and (3) ideas about adjustment to a new culture. Considerations for designing an orientation program are discussed as well as the roles of various personnel involved in foreign student orientation. The problem of financing orientation programs and the difficulty of program evaluation are also addressed. (NRB)

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Orientation of Foreign Students

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GUIDELINE SERIES 4

Copies of this publication are free, except for a postage and handling charge.

Since its 1948 founding as an organization with 60 members and a budget of $1,400, the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs (NAFSA) has exhibited continuous growth and development. Today, with over 3,500 members across the country, it represents over 1,000 academic institutions, business and educational organizations, local citizen groups active in foreign student affairs, and courtesy associates from embassies in Washington, D.C.

In 1963, the Field Service Program was established under a grant to NAFSA from the Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs of the U.S. Department of State. The goal of the program initially was to improve the experience of foreign students in the U.S. by enhancing the professional expertise of persons on college and university campuses working in educational exchange programs and those associated with related community groups. More recent interpretation has permitted expansion of the grant to include services to persons dealing with U.S. student abroad programs. Numerous publications dealing with all aspects of international educational interchange have been prepared and distributed through the generous support of the grant. Principal among these have been the volumes in the *Guideline Series*, each of which suggests standards and procedures in dealing with the subject treated. The *Guidelines* undergo periodic revision to incorporate new ideas and developments as the association continues its efforts to encourage high standards in educational exchange programs.

This *Guideline* was prepared by Gary Althen of the University of Iowa at Iowa City.

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INTRODUCTION

Providing orientation for newly arrived foreign students is considered to be one of the main responsibilities accepted by an educational institution that admits students from abroad. Orientation programs can contribute to the academic and social success of foreign students, and also to the education of the U.S. students, faculty and staff who work with them. A good orientation program can reduce the number of difficulties that new foreign students might otherwise face, and can speed their adaptation to the U.S. academic system.

The purpose of this *Guideline* is to provide ideas and suggestions that might assist in the design and conduct of orientation programs for new foreign students.

It should be made clear at the outset that there is no one ideal way to organize and conduct a foreign student orientation program. Among the many considerations which contribute to the variety in orientation programs are the numbers and characteristics of the new students to be served; the institution's academic calendar; the presence or absence of U.S. students, faculty and community representatives who might be of assistance; and the amount of funding available.

However an orientation program is organized, its success will be impaired by a number of constraints that are inherent in efforts to orient new foreign students. Because it is helpful if program planners are mindful of these hindrances, they are enumerated in the following section.

Constraints on the Effectiveness of Foreign Student Orientation Programs

A number of realities about new foreign students militate against reliance on a formally organized set of sessions for their orientation.

I. New students' erratic arrival times. No matter when an orientation program is scheduled, there will be new students arriving significantly in advance of its opening. Others will arrive while the program is in progress, and still others will appear when the program is over. New foreign students need orientation whenever they arrive, so it seems clear that more devices must be used than a single organized program.

II. New students' uneven motivation to participate. New foreign students evince a wide variety in their level of interest in orientation. Some are eager to attend all possible sessions and read all information that is provided, while others, for various reasons, prefer to operate more on their own.

III. New students' diverse preoccupations. New students may be heavily preoccupied with such things as exhaustion, loneliness, concern with finding a place to live or meeting a friend from home, hunger (if they find the local food difficult to tolerate) or cold (if they arrive from a warm country in the midst of a northern winter). It is difficult, if not impossible, to get the sustained attention of people who are as preoccupied as new foreign students often are.

IV. New students' range in English proficiency. No matter what level of English proficiency is demanded by people presenting an orientation program, some new students will be unable to follow what is said, while others will follow so easily that they will be bored.

V. Difficulties in evaluating orientation programs. While it may be the case that systematic evaluation of an orientation program can provide suggestions for improving the next such program, evaluation of an orientation program is extremely difficult. If the evaluation is done at the conclusion of the program, participants will not be in a position to know whether or not the program has helped them, because they will not yet have had the experience for which the program was intended to prepare them. (They will know whether or not they have *enjoyed* the program, but planning a program with the idea of maximizing participant

enjoyment is probably not the best way to convey the information that the participants supposedly need.) If, on the other hand, the evaluation is conducted some time after the close of the program, the participants will have had such a large number of experiences that they will generally be unable to remember what they learned from the orientation program and what they learned elsewhere.

Overcoming the Constraints on Effective Foreign Student Orientation

There are a number of alternatives to complete reliance on a formal orientation program. The first is to provide extensive *pre-arrival information* to newly admitted foreign applicants. The pre-arrival information should give complete, detailed logistical information that will be needed by a person coming from abroad to attend the admitting institution. Topics that should certainly be covered are these: how to reach the institution via air, rail and ground transportation; where to go upon arrival; arrangements for housing; amount of money to bring in cash or traveler's checks, and amount of money that will be needed during the course of the year; what kind of weather to expect; where to send mail and packages; dates for the orientation program; and addresses and telephone numbers of people to contact in case additional information or help is needed. In general, the logistical information should make clear that detailed arrangements for the new student's arrival have been made.

Pre-arrival information can also contain useful hints and suggestions for the newly admitted applicant. These might include the suggestion that the new student try to learn how to type; bring pictures or slides from home; bring the academic documents of a spouse if the spouse may later want to become a student; bring a record of inoculations received in the past; and so on. To decide what suggestions might go into the pre-arrival information, it is well to consult various campus offices that deal with foreign students and see if they are aware of recurring problems that might be avoided if the students had received certain information before leaving home.

Well-prepared information sent to newly admitted applicants will usually be read and reread by its recipients, who are not yet preoccupied by the many new things they will encounter upon arrival at their new academic institution. Pre-arrival information can urge newly admitted applicants to attend a pre-departure orientation program if one is available in their area. Such programs are sometimes offered by bi-national cultural centers, Fulbright Commissions, international educational agencies, and even some ministries of education. Alumni or vacationing students from U.S. educational institutions sometimes mount "in-country orientation programs" for newly admitted applicants. At a minimum, pre-arrival information can urge its recipients to locate people who have studied in the U.S. (and preferably at the admitting institution, which can try to supply the names of alumni from the new students' area) and talk to them about the adjustments they thought were necessary for achieving academic success in the United States. It is not too early, in pre-arrival information, to encourage incoming students to be mindful that, just as they will have to adjust their habits and ways of thinking while in the U.S., they will have to readjust upon returning home.

At some institutions, nationality groups prepare a pre-arrival letter that is sent along with the institution's materials. Of course, this letter may be in the new student's own language. Such letters can include very specific suggestions about what to bring from home. They can offer help upon arrival, and give the name, address and telephone number of someone who is prepared to assist.

A second way to reduce reliance on a single, formal orientation program is to make sure the program is extremely *flexible*, with respect to scheduling, personnel, and means by which information and support are provided. Much more will be said about this later in this *Guideline*.

Finally, some kind of "on-going orientation" can be offered after classes begin in order to go over information that might have been missed the first time, answer questions that have arisen following the formal orientation program, and provide social support to those new students who want it. There are a number of possible formats for on-going orientation. One entails weekly or less frequent sessions devoted to open discussions, presentations on designated topics, structured experiences that are designed to elicit discussion of cultural differences and adjustment to new cultures, tours, or some combination of these elements. Classes (usually for academic credit) on aspects of U.S. history, society and culture are an increasingly popular way of providing on-going orientation.

The *Guideline* discusses the goals of initial orientation for foreign students, topics to cover in an orientation program, formulating a program, personnel, financing a program, and evaluation.

ORIENTATION FOR NEW FOREIGN STUDENTS

Goals

Providing foreign students with information that U.S. students already possess is the most obvious goal of foreign student orientation. In the next section is a summary of topics to cover in orientation.

Another goal is providing foreign students with help in learning to gather information on their own. It is safe to assume that all new students will not get all the information they will need for academic and social success via the orientation program. What they can all usefully derive from such a program is help in learning to get the information they later find they need.

A third goal is to provide the new students with help in understanding the role of, and learning to deal with, U.S. students, faculty, and staff—including the Foreign Student Adviser.

While activities intended to accomplish these three goals are under way, some other important goals will incidentally be realized. The orientation program provides new students with:

- time to rest before the opening of classes,
- time to practice English as it is used locally,
- time to learn their way around the local area,
- time to establish some relationships with other people,
- clarification, derived from seeing what takes place in the program, of the role of the FSA and the foreign student office, and
- clarification of the role of the foreign student within the institution.

What to Include in Foreign Student Orientation

Three broad categories of information or ideas deserve consideration during an orientation program. These are (1) information about practical matters, (2) information about the U.S. academic system, and (3) ideas about adjusting to a new culture.

Practical matters. What is said (and/or provided in written form) about some of these practical concerns will vary from institution to institution, depending on local circumstances. What is included here is a list of topics and some phrases referring to aspects of those topics that might appropriately be covered in the orientation program.

A. Housing: Locating a place to live; what a lease is; what to look for in a lease; criteria for choosing a place to live; getting help in finding a place to live; relationship with landlords, roommates and/or residence hall staff; housekeeping.

B. Food: Locations and types of restaurants and of grocery stores; guidelines for food shopping and diet.

C. Transportation: Summoning and paying for taxi cabs; learning about bus schedules, routes and fares; out-of-town travel; personal automobiles—driver's license, insurance, traffic laws; bicycles.

D. Communication: Using telephones; getting a telephone; mail service; telegrams; newspapers and magazines.

E. Shopping: Where to buy clothing, personal items, furniture and furnishings, and books; advertising; the yellow pages.

F. Handling money: Currency; banks and banking services; writing checks; health insurance; budgeting and financial recordkeeping, shopping for bargains.

G. Services: Laundry and dry cleaning; haircutting; shoe repair.

H. Recreation: What is available; locations; cost.

I. Immigration regulations: Travel documents; maintenance of status.

J. Getting help: Sources of information, such as offices or people on the campus and in the community, newspapers, the telephone directory and institutional publications; finding the courage to ask for help.

U.S. academic system. The system of higher education in the U.S. differs in important ways from virtually all other such systems, and the sooner foreign students understand these differences and learn to operate according to the system's "rules," the better

off they will be. Here are some aspects of the system that new foreign students can profitably be informed about:

A. Structure of the system: Academic calendar; graduation requirements; courses; units of registration (semester hours, etc.); grades and the grading system; departmental and faculty autonomy.

B. What is expected of students: Class attendance; note-taking; participation in discussion; assignments; laboratories; research and writing; use of the library; examinations (particularly objective-type tests); getting help with academic problems; academic honesty; the importance of independence, initiative and the ability to synthesize.

C. Role of the academic adviser, for undergraduates and for graduate students.

D. Learning about courses and professors: Sources of information about courses and professors, and the varying degrees of reliability of those sources.

E. Registration procedures, and changes in registration.

F. Study skills: Scheduling of study time; reading effectively; note-taking; preparing for examinations.

G. Student services: Location of and services provided by the admissions office, the registrar, business office, financial aids, counseling, learning centers, and the student activities office.

H. Role of the Foreign Student Adviser

Ideas about adjusting to a new culture. Much of a foreign student's learning derives not from formal academic work but from the encounter with a new culture. That encounter will almost inevitably be disconcerting to some degree; orientation activities and materials that address questions about cultural differences can reduce the negative impact of the encounter and can enhance culture learning. The forthcoming NAFSA publication *Learning Across Cultures,* particularly the first and last chapters of Part I, contains extensive information that is useful for this aspect of an orientation program. What follows here is little more than a listing of topics worthy of consideration during orientation.

A. Comparing cultures: How do cultures differ? Consider assumptions and values, communicative styles, and patterns of thought (that is, ways of reaching conclusions).

B. Distinguishing characteristics of U.S. culture: Individualism; egalitarianism; informality; time consciousness; materialism; limited friendships.

C. Coping with cultural differences: Culture shock and patterns of adjustment; learning about appropriate social conduct (e.g., classroom and office behavior, male-female relationships, social relationships in general, proper behavior for guests, friendship patterns, gift-giving, use of names and titles); understanding the cultural influences on people's behavior; learning not to evaluate other people's behavior; beginning to think about going home and the readjustments that will require.

Designing the Program

The preceding sections make clear that there are many, many topics that can be addressed during an orientation program. One cannot realistically expect to convey a significant amount of information about all these topics to all new foreign students. One's task in designing an orientation program is to go as far toward that goal as possible.

Some basic considerations. It is vital to remember that new foreign students, like other human beings, cannot effectively absorb information or ideas that are being presented to them if they are extremely tired, hungry, or without a place to live. As is pointed out in psychologist Abraham Maslow's well known "hierarchy of needs," these physiological needs must be met before people can be expected to use their minds well.

It is also important to keep in mind that orientation activities and materials must attract participation or interest and hold attention, or they are pointless. This means that presentations must be interesting and of a reasonable length, and that written materials must be carefully designed. Important points should be made in more than one way, and more than one time.

And it is important to adopt a flexible approach to orientation, so as to accommodate the new students' variety of needs, interests, backgrounds and learning styles. A number of approaches to presenting orientation materials and experiences are listed in the next section.

Means of furnishing material and experiences. A good orientation program will incorporate a variety of approaches to learning. *Learning Across Cultures: Intercultural Communication and International Educational Exchange* offers commentary on the various approaches listed here, and some suggestions for incorporating them into a cohesive program.

- Lectures
- Informal discussions
- Panel presentations
- Reading and other printed material (e.g., maps, course schedules, information sheets, handbooks, summaries of important information)
- Simulations
- Role plays
- Assigned activities (e.g., finding specific books in a library; a scavenger hunt; getting specific information about something)
- Social activities (preferably including some "old" foreign students, some U.S. students, some faculty and staff members, and some people from the community)

- Films
- Tours
- Homestays and/or home hospitality
- Off-campus "retreats"
- Self-instructional materials
- "Buddy system" (involving either "old" foreign students or U.S. students)
- Lists of do's and don't's
- Individual attention from a staff member (often called an "initial interview," and held in addition to any formal orientation program)

Of course, no single orientation program is likely to employ all these many approaches. In choosing from among them, a program planner will consider how much time and what materials and personnel are available to assist with the program, and the particular needs of the participants and the institution. Changing the pace by means of varying approaches is essential if participant interest is to be maintained, but more is at issue than simple variety. The components of the program should be put in a sequence whereby later activities build on earlier ones, and important points are addressed in a variety of ways. It is prudent to give all crucial information to *all* new students in written form. This will assure that all students have ready access to the information, whether or not they attend sessions in an orientation program.

Personnel

The Foreign Student Adviser will normally be the one to orchestrate the orientation program. It is usually wise to involve others as well, so that (1) the new students will have the opportunity to meet as many people as possible, (2) the burden of mounting the program is shared, (3) other administrative offices and personnel are brought into contact with foreign student activities, and (4) U.S. students and others can share in the extremely educational and rewarding experience of working closely with new arrivals to their country or campus.

Just which other people besides the FSA will be involved in the orientation program varies considerably, according to such factors as the length and complexity of the orientation program and the schedules of other people who might conceivably take part.

A high-level official of the institution often formally greets the new arrivals and discusses the contributions foreign students can make to the institution and the community by taking the initiative in educational programs and social contacts. Representatives of student service offices that new foreign students have already had contact with or are certainly going to have contact with—e.g., admissions, registrar, business office, health service, learning center—might be introduced, and, if time allows, speak briefly about their services. If the institution has an orientation office, then staff members from there can be heavily involved in foreign student orientation; at a minimum, the orientation programs for foreign and for U.S. students should be coordinated to avoid conflicts, and new foreign students should be given every encouragement to attend the orientation office's program.

Faculty members can be involved in a variety of ways, such as presenting information about the U.S. academic system (in comparative terms) or U.S. society and culture, or hosting or otherwise participating in social events. New foreign graduate students are very well served by small orientation programs planned by faculty (and perhaps students) in their particular academic departments. Such programs can include meeting departmental personnel, seeing research and study facilities, learning about policies and practices affecting graduate students, and some social activity. Staff and faculty members who are chosen to address or otherwise work with new foreign students are preferably people who are comfortable talking to a group that includes people with limited English proficiency, and who can express themselves clearly and simply without being condescending. It is best to "speak simply, but not simple-mindedly," in talking with new students from abroad.

There are advantages and disadvantages to including experienced foreign students in an orientation program. They often feel an obligation to take part and be of assistance, and can usually be relied upon to contribute significant amounts of time. Of course, they have already had the experience that the new arrivals are having, and can therefore discuss it with authority. On the other hand, some research has shown that foreign students (like foreigners anywhere) develop and perpetuate misunderstandings about the host culture, so it is not unlikely that new foreign students will hear some misinformation, or at least some very questionable interpretations, from experienced foreign students.

U.S. students stand to learn an immense amount by assisting with the orientation of new foreign students. Hearing the new students' reactions to things, and trying to answer their questions, can give U.S. students a stimulating new viewpoint on their own society and culture. And, of course, they can enjoy the good feeling of knowing they have been of assistance to people who needed their help.

In the case of both U.S. and experienced foreign students, it is usually not enough merely to secure

their agreement to participate in the orientation program. Some training is desirable. It cannot be assumed that current students, foreign or domestic, have a comprehensive view of the institution or the community. They might not be able to answer questions about procedures for securing on-campus housing, or about distribution requirements, or about places to buy Oriental vegetables, and so on. The FSA will want to provide some training to student participants in the orientation program, giving them basic information that new foreign students can safely be supposed to need, acquainting them with places to refer questions they cannot answer, and helping them deal sensitively with the intercultural communication aspects of work with new foreign students.

There are a number of ways in which current students can be involved in an orientation program. At some institutions, a "cosmopolitan club" (or whatever the organization of foreign and U.S. students is called) will have almost complete responsibility for planning and conducting the orientation program. Nationality groups can be asked to name specific people who will help new students upon their arrival. Current students can be assigned as "buddies" of new students on a one-to-one basis. U.S. students in such fields as counseling, social work, student personnel or intercultural communication might work in an orientation program as part of an academic assignment. Current students can conduct tours, lead small discussion groups, and host social gatherings.

If there are community organizations that take an active interest in foreign students, then representatives from them might be included in some way in the orientation program. They might help staff the program by having trained people to assist new students; they might provide tours of the community, or evening hospitality, or a social activity, or temporary housing, or assistance in locating housing. They might have a place on the program to talk about their group's activities. If there is an organization for spouses, it can offer sessions about family and children's concerns.

Finally, various public officials might be included. At some institutions the community's mayor or other administrative officer brings words of greeting. A police officer talks about the role of the police in the U.S. A representative of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service gives a talk about immigration regulations and procedures affecting foreign students.

As in the case of staff and faculty members who are chosen to address the new students, public officials who speak to the group should be at ease in doing so, and should be able to express themselves clearly to a group that includes people with a less than complete command of English.

Financial Support

Budgets for foreign student orientation programs vary greatly. With careful planning, coordinating, and recruiting of volunteers, a substantial orientation program can be mounted with minimal cash outlay.

The operating budget of the foreign student office or of the larger administrative unit of which it is a part will normally provide the bulk of the financial support for the orientation program. If there is a separate orientation office, it might well contribute, given its overall responsibility for the orientation of new students. The student government, if it has money to allocate, might support portions of the foreign student orientation program, particularly portions that have been organized and are to be conducted by students or student groups.

Some institutions collect an orientation fee from new foreign students, and use that fee to cover the cost of the program. This is more likely to be done when the program includes an off-campus retreat or other relatively costly activity.

Donations are another source of support for orientation programs. These might be donations of funds, but they might be in kind, as of refreshments for a party. Chambers of commerce, better business bureaus and banks often give away printed information that is useful for new students.

Evaluation

It has already been suggested that evaluating foreign student orientation programs is a difficult task, one that probably cannot be accomplished to the satisfaction of any sophisticated evaluator. From this it does not necessarily follow that no attempt at evaluation should be made. At the very least, evaluation can help planners realize (if they have not already realized on intuitive grounds) what aspects of their programs are simply not effective.

Evaluation of a foreign student program need not involve the construction of questionnaires or the holding of lengthy structured interviews. One can simply observe levels of attendance, the presence or absence of attention on the part of participants, and the number and nature of questions that are asked or comments that are made. One can talk informally with various new students to get their impressions of the program and their ideas about ways in which it might be improved. One can notice, in the weeks and months that fol-

low the program, whether any systematic problems arise among the new students, and then seek ways of forestalling those problems by modifying subsequent orientation programs (and subsequent pre-arrival information or on-going orientation programs).

Suggestions about more formal means of evaluating an orientation program can be found in the final chapter of Part I of *Learning Across Cultures*.

CONCLUSION

A large number of ideas have been included in this *Guideline*, along with a few suggestions as to their application. It is for the FSA or other program planner to go through these ideas and select the ones that are most pertinent to the particular setting, and to combine them in a way that seems suitable for the particular participants.

It has been pointed out that there is no ideal orientation program for new foreign students, and some of the factors that militate against a "completely successful" program have been mentioned. It follows from these considerations that planners of orientation programs are well advised to keep their expectations at a modest level. No matter what is planned and arranged, participation and attention will be erratic, and the outcome will be virtually impossible to assess with accuracy. Once the planner accepts this as an unavoidable fact, it is possible to enjoy experimenting with various program formats, looking for ones that seem more effective and that involve campus and community personnel in constructive ways.

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Ansary, Tamim (ed.). **Orientation Handbook.** San Francisco: The Asia Foundation (550 Kearney Street, 94108), annual. Contains general information for new foreign students in the U.S. There are chapters about, among other things, financial planning, the U.S. educational system, housing, social relations in the U.S., libraries, medical care and insurance, immigration and other laws and regulations, and income tax. Copies are free (but a donation is welcome) upon request.